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ABSTRACT

The principle of empathic learning (involving activities that help students feel what it is to be like someone else) can be used to teach poetry, a material about which students have strong prejudices, and an activity they cannot imagine themselves ever doing or being interested in. First, students are presented with the conception that people read and write poetry for itself, like crafts, sports, or going to movies. Students are told that poetry is a kind of game, and the first game the instructor talks about is the game of balancing oppositions. After discussing a poem full of oppositions, students suggest pairs of opposites, analyze poems in their textbooks, and write very brief opposition poems themselves. Similar activities are conducted for persona poems (in which the speaker is clearly not the poet); and the stances of apostrophe and reminiscence. Students are told that poets play games: then the students play the same games for themselves and share the results with the class. (RS)

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The Poet's Stance:
Empathic Learning in the Introductory Poetry Class

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Many of the students who come to us, come from homes in which the parents are overworked, often holding down two jobs, trying to get by on barely adequate high school educations. These students live their lives in one small place. They read very little. They travel not at all. Even their consumption of popular culture tends to be limited to a particular range of music, a particular set of television programs more or less similar to one another, and a particular kind of movie. In short, there has been little in their lives calculated to stretch their imaginations. When these students begin college we ask them to read materials and carry on activities that seem totally meaningless to them. We call these activities English, and sociology, and history, and biology, and calculus, and physics, and art. But they can not imagine, and I mean that literally, they can not imagine why people do these things, or how they do them, or what connection they have with the day-to-day business of survival. They know that they don't want their lives to be as

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grim as they think their parents' lives are -- or, in the case of non-traditional students, as they feel their own lives have hitherto been. And they think that better education is a key. But they resent our putting these bizarre activities and studies between them and the securing of that cash-valuable diploma. They can not imagine -- conceive in their minds, feel -- any connection between these fields and activities and their own lives. We can stand up there and talk and talk, and use audio-visual aids till our bulbs burn out, but until they can imagine what we are talking about, and especially until they can imagine how and why people carry on that way, they will not learn. And the problem is further complicated by the prejudices, especially the anti-intellectual prejudices, that so many students bring with them to college.

In human concerns and endeavors the opposite of failure of imagination is empathy. Hence, I call this approach "empathic learning." Though the term empathic learning is, I believe, my own, the principle involved is an old one in education. When students in a sociology class are blindfolded for several hours or assigned to spend a day in a wheelchair, in order to better understand the problems of the physically handicapped, when students in a communication class role-play, when students in a physics class are assigned a realistic problem to solve, they are learning how it feels to be the other--the handicapped, the authority figure, the scientist. But the principle of empathic

learning is capable of much wider application, especially in courses or disciplines where emotional attitudes and prejudices affect the learning environment. As an example I will show how I use it to teach poetry, a material about which students have strong prejudices, and an activity that they can not imagine themselves ever doing or being interested in.

When undergraduates begin to study poetry they often start with the wrong question: What use is poetry. But poetry is not, in its essence, a "useful" thing. That is to say, poetry is not something we make or read for some purpose beyond the poetry. It is not, for instance, like medicine, which we study so that we can make other people healthy and ourself rich, or like computer keyboarding, which we learn so that we can do our work more efficiently and--perhaps--get a better job. No, poetry is more like crafts or sports or moviegoing. It is something we do for its own sake. Kids who play basketball play basketball to play basketball. Of course they benefit in terms of health, coordination, and socialization. But they don't play basketball to get healthy or more coordinated or more socially attuned. They play basketball to play basketball or, as they would put it, to have fun. Similarly, my father-in-law doesn't build model trains for any extrinsic reason. He does it just because he likes to do it. And when I go to a movie I usually am not going to further my education or to keep in touch with popular culture. I go because I like going to the movies and want to see Robin Hood or The Fisher King. Crafts, movies, and sports, for most of

us, are activities we engage in for their own sake, . . . because we like them, . . . to have fun. Poetry is an activity in this same category. Of course there are benefits, just as there are benefits deriving from crafts, movies, or sports. But we don't do them for the benefits. We read and write poetry for itself, like we play basketball, or volleyball, or go skiing.

Once I have gotten this conception of poetry over to students, I raise the next question: what, then, do poets amd poems do. One way to answer that question, is to say that poetry is a kind of game, or more properly set of games, that poets play, sometimes simultaneously.

The first game I talk about is the game of balancing oppositions. We usually start with Robert Burns's poem "John Anderson, My Jo." Having read the poem in class, discussed unusual words (brent, beld) and unusual pronunciations (ane, thegither), and made sure we know who is saying what to whom, I ask students to point out opposites in the poem. It soon becomes apparent that practically every line involves oppositions, and that we can arrange these oppositions in two columns under some rubric such as "Now and Then" or "Youth and Age." The only element in the poem that refuses to fit under one or the other term is love -- and that, of course is the point of the poem.

What Burns is doing here is playing with opposites or contrasts. To emphasize that this poem is a game, I point out that Robbie, when he wrote it, was a youthful male, not an aged female: poetry is a game much more than it is an effusion of unbridled personal emotion.

Next, the students suggest other pairs of opposites or contrasts. I fill the board with these, while the students copy them onto a sheet of paper. I then send them home over the weekend with a double assignment: Read the designated contrast poems in the textbook, to see how other poets play with opposites and contrasts. Then write three opposition poems yourself. The rules for these poems are as follows:

1. Play with oppositions, the ones we came up with in class, and any others you come up with.

2. When you have some that seem to fit together, fit them together in a poem.

3. No rhyme.

4. Make the poem as short as possible: once it is written, go over it and see if you can cut out words, phrases, connectives.

When we re-convene, each student reads one poem. My comments are bland: "nice"; "um-hum"; "yes." I do sometimes suggest words that might be left out. Almost always there is one poem that blows the class away. Avoiding rhyme and achieving

succinctness are very important requirements, as they focus the attention of the students on words and on making each word work hard. The ultimate in succinctness was achieved by a student who wrote a poem called:

Tax Time

Gains: losses.
Debits: credits.

Answering the question "What do poets do" by saying "They play games" is important, because this answer emphasizes the playfulness of poetry. And I keep this answer before students' eyes all through the lessons. But another, more helpful answer, is to say that poets put themselves into a conventional stance, and speak from that stance. The stance constitutes a generative frame out of which the poem emerges. In "John Anderson, My Jo" Robert Burns is a juggler of opposites. But he is simultaneously assuming stance: he is taking on the role of the aged wife of John Anderson. In generalized terms, he is assuming a persona. And persona is the first stance that I talk about.

An argument could be made that all poems are written from the stance of a persona. But for convenience I define persona poems as first person poems in which the speaker is clearly not the

poet. Even so, this group includes a huge crosssection of English poetry, from Browning's dramatic monologues, and poems like "Ulysses" in which the speaker is a figure from literature or history, to poems in which the speaker is an animal or even an inanimate object.

An important sub-class of persona poems consists of those in which the speaker is a carpe diem lover. Emphasizing the conventional nature of the carpe diem posture or stance clarifies the meaning of these poems and foregrounds the larger issues that they raise.

After we have looked at persona poems I again send the students back to their homes and dorms to compose two persona poems.

Waller's carpe diem poem "Go Lovely Rose" provides a transition to the next unit and the next poetic stance or generative frame,

symbolizing. This stance generates poems built around a single image that stands for both itself and the other, poems like "Anecdote of a Jar," "Crossing the Bar," and "Spring and Fall."

From the symbolizing stance poems by Blake such as "Tyger, Tyger" or "The Sick Rose" lead easily to the next stance, that of apostrophe. In a poem of apostrophe the poet, presumably speaking in their own voice, addresses themself to some other -- absent, dead, or inanimate -- and pours out feelings that the other arouses. Apostrophe is often a truly confessional game that goes beyond game. That is one of the reasons for holding back on it -- so that students can see that there are many modes of non-confessional poetry, many non-confessional stances that a poet can take. Apostrophe is often the controlling stance is the ode and the elegy. And poems to fathers seem to take up more than their fair share of space in this generative frame: "My Papa's Waltz" by Roethke, "To Daddy," by Sylvia Plath, and "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," by Dylan Thomas are clear and popular examples. As an exercise in generating a poem from this frame I suggest that the student think of someone once important to them, positively or negatively. Then imagine a situation in which they might speak to this person today. In the poem they are to say what they would like to say in that situation. In doing the exercise myself I imagined meeting for lunch with a constant childhood companion who always had impossible get-rich schemes, such as re-discovering the lost

Dutchman gold mine, and who always mocked me as naive and an easy mark.

The final stance I discuss is the reminiscent stance, also known as the epiphany game. Poems written from this stance reminisce about an incident, almost like a short story, usually ending with an epiphany -- an insight encapsulated in an image that tops off the narrative. This is usually a romantic stance. Arguably it is the stance of Wordsworth upon Westminster Bridge. It is the more clearly the stance of Whitman under the stars after he heard the learned astronomer. And it is probably the most common stance taken by contemporary poets. Because for me poetry is usually just one unit in a larger course in introduction to literature, and because by this time students have already written as many as ten poems, I usually don't require a poem in the reflective, reminiscing epiphany mode. Instead, at this point I have them go back and rework two to four poems for final presentation. But there is no reason why a reminiscence poem couldn't be required in a longer or more ambitious program.

The first approach to poetry that I talked about, juggling oppositions, is in fact a different sort of thing than the stances I mentioned, namely the stances of persona, including the carpe diem persona, symbolizer, apostrophizer, and the reminiscing stance. Playing with oppositions is really one of the poet's games, like the rhyme game, the meter game, the

figurative games, and those other word games poets play. But these are stances the poet takes when he plays his word games. Amazingly, the stances are quite limited in number. These four, and perhaps the balladeer stance, cover just about all the poems in the standard anthologies. While I have not yet conducted an exhaustive search, I know that it will not be easy to find an English lyric poem that is not written from one of these four stances.

The answer, then, that I give my students to the question of what poets do is a double answer. They play games, the rhyme and meter games, the figurative games, and especially the opposition game. And they take certain traditional stances, or generate poems from a limited number of traditional generative frames. Some of these traditional stances are quite old, such as the stances of assuming a persona, apostrophizing, and symbolizing. But the reminiscing stance, with accompanying epiphany, seems to date from the Romantic revolution, and only to have come into its own in the twentieth century. Finally, once students see what poets do, I tell them to go and do likewise. And they do.

Each time we learn a new poetry game, the students go and play it for themselves, and then share the results with the class. What they learn is that they like these games. They admire the way other people, classmates as well as great poets, play them. And

they like to play the games themselves. Poetry is no longer something they can not imagine.

Empathic learning, then, involves activity that helps the student feel what it feels like to do science, or literature, or art, or what it feels like to live in a different time, place, or set of circumstances. While some fields already incorporate it, especially as role playing, fields such as history, economics, art history, and philosophy, would probably benefit by incorporating it into their pedagogy on a wider basis, and fields such as science and language should emphasize the affective, empathic element in the lab experience. We cannot expect students to learn what they can not even imagine.